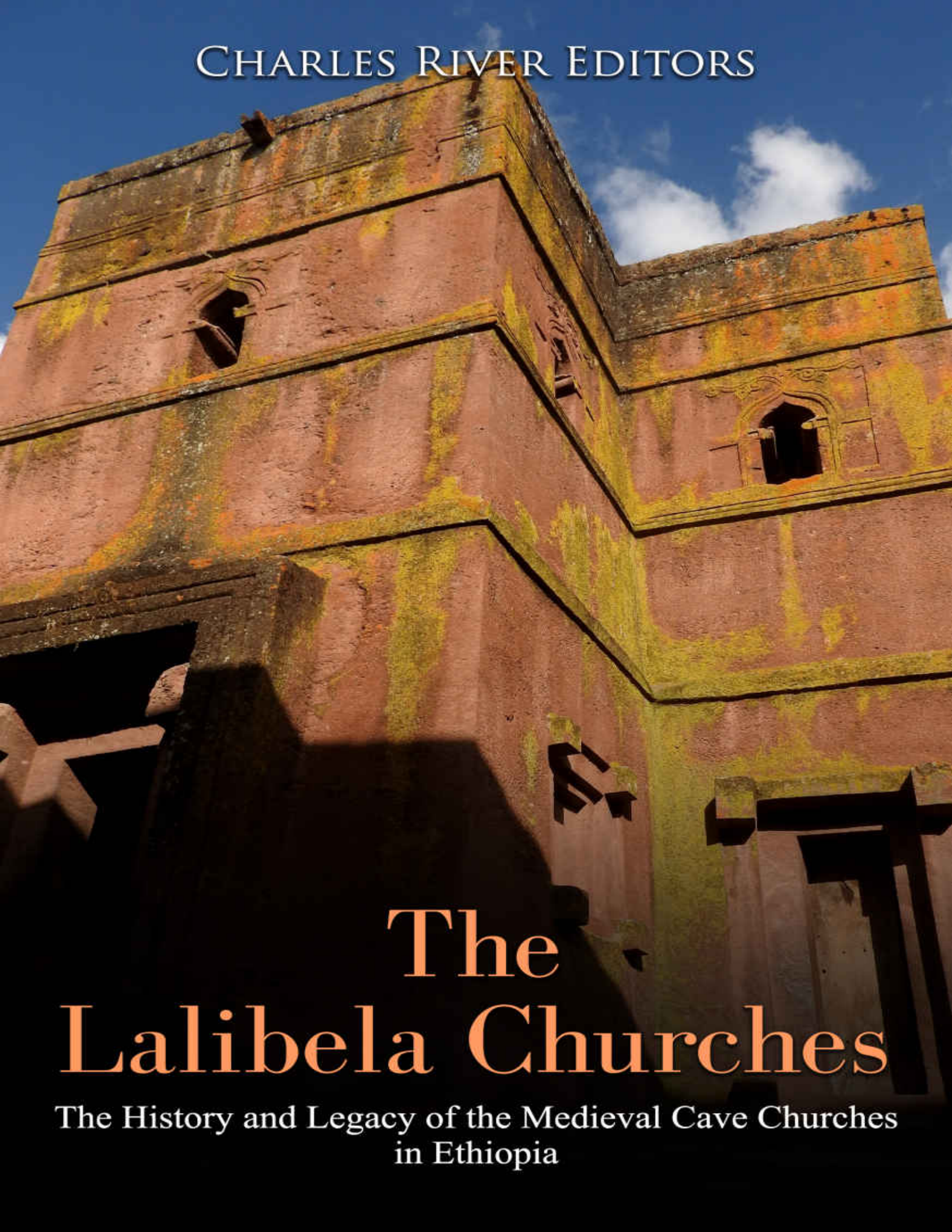

CHARLES RIVER EDITORS

The Lalibela Churches

The History and Legacy of the Medieval Cave Churches in Ethiopia

The Lalibela Churches: The History and Legacy of the Medieval Cave Churches in Ethiopia

By Charles River Editors

Bernard Gagnon's picture of the Church of St. George in Lalibela

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Introduction

Francesco Bandarin's picture of Bet Medhane Alem

The Lalibela Churches

"I weary of writing more about these buildings, because it seems to me that I shall not be believed if I write more...I swear by God, in Whose power I am, that all I have written is the truth." – Francisco Álvares

In the Lasta Mountains of northern Ethiopia, high on an arid plateau in the foothills, the settlement of Lalibela slumbered for centuries as little more than a pilgrimage site at the end of a long and weary footpath. The ancient trade routes between the Eritrean coast and the central highland redoubts that would later coalesce as the imperial capital of Addis Ababa passed fifty miles to the east of Lalibela, and from the early thirteenth century, after the passing of Gebre Mesqel Lalibela himself, the site slipped into decline. The focus of imperial government shifted south, under the influence of successive emperors, as the holy sites of Roha faded from the popular

consciousness. Only the occasional band of pilgrims made the journey over the rugged mountain passes, and across the waterless high valleys to repose at the mythical site, now known only to a handful of faithful acolytes.

The site first came to European attention when it was visited in the early 16th century by the Portuguese explorer Pêro da Covilhã, who struck inland from Zeila on the Somali coast in a quest for the legendary Kingdom of Prester John. He was received by the Emperor Eskender, but he was effectively held a prisoner in Ethiopia for 30 years. During that time, he visited and briefly recorded his impressions of Lalibela.

Also in search of the Kingdom of Prester John was the Portuguese missionary Francisco Álvares, who arrived in Ethiopia in 1515 as part of an ambassadorial mission authorized by the Portuguese King Manuel I. There, in the court of the Emperor Dawit II, he met numerous sundry Europeans, including Pêro da Covilhã, and Nicolò Brancaleon, the Venetian painter who settled in Ethiopia in 1480 and whose artistic influence remains visible in ecclesiastical imagery all over the country.

It was Alvarez who described in detail the monuments of Lalibela in his exhaustive travelogue, *A True Relation of the Lands of Prester John of the Indies*. The explorer wrote, “At a day's journey from this church of Imbra Christo are edifices, the like of which and so many, cannot, as it appears to me, be found in the world. They are churches entirely excavated in the rock, very well hewn. The names of these churches are these: Emanuel, St. Saviour, St. Mary, Holy Cross, St. George, Golgotha, Bethlehem, Marcoreos, the Martyrs. The principal one is Lalibela. This Lalibela, they say, was a King in this same country for eighty years, and he was King before the one before mentioned who was named Abraham. This King ordered these edifices to be made. He does not lie in the church which bears his name, he lies in the church of Golgotha, which is the church of the fewest buildings here.”

In 1550, an edition of Alvarez’s book was published in Venice by Giovanni Battista Ramusio, the Italian geographer and travel writer. This version included numerous drawings and plans, but who supplied these illustrations remains a mystery. The next known European visitor to the site was Miguel de Castanhoso, a low-ranking soldier in the service of

Cristóvão da Gama, a Portuguese diplomat and soldier who led an aggressive but ultimately unsuccessful military crusade into Ethiopia between 1541 and 1543. What took Miguel de Castanhoso to Lalibela is not known, nor were his impressions recorded.

By the dawn of the 17th century, Portuguese influence in Africa fell into decline, and the occasions of European contact with Ethiopia became very few and far between. It would be another three centuries before another European would venture into the holy precincts of Lalibela as part of a British military expedition mounted in 1867. Thus, the "rediscovery" of the remarkable churches and the story of Christianity in Ethiopia would only be recently written.

The Lalibela Churches: The History and Legacy of the Medieval Cave Churches in Ethiopia chronicles the remarkable construction and history of the churches. Along with pictures and a bibliography, you will learn about the Lalibela Churches like never before.

The Lalibela Churches: The History and Legacy of the Medieval Cave Churches in Ethiopia

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Christianity in Ethiopia

"But the church is symbolized and called by the name Ethiopia." - Martin Luther

Portuguese maritime explorers had been gradually probing southwards along the west coast of Africa since the early part of the 15th century, seeding spores of the Portuguese language, religion, and trade interests at numerous points along the way. These journeys were both enterprises in their own right, insofar as trade off the African coast was an end unto itself, as well as an effort to establish Portuguese primacy in the spice trade with India through the discovery of a viable sea route to the east. There was also something of a quasi-religious objective to the undertaking: locating the mythical Kingdom of Prester John, a fabled Christian empire thought to exist somewhere in Africa.

By then, the Europeans had believed in the existence of this Christian kingdom for hundreds of years, making Prester John a fascinating but difficult topic given that his story was entirely one of legend. Given that he was not a real figure, many modern histories either omit him or ignore his story and influence altogether, but as counterintuitive as it may seem, Prester John is important because for over 500 years people thought he was real. As a result, people took very real actions attempting to find them, and they had an impact on the world, as far back as the travels of Marco Polo.

By the 12th century, it was believed that far to the east, beyond the lands controlled by the Muslim armies, lived a powerful Christian king named Prester John in the land of India. While he was a king, he was also a priest ("Prester" means Priest and was supposedly the only title he took). His kingdom was believed to be grand and contained many wonders. Marco Polo looked for Prester John, and the Crusaders wanted to reach out to Prester John. Portugal's Henry the Navigator sent his ships out with explicit instructions of what they should do if they met Prester John, and on his historic voyages, Columbus carried two books, *The Travels of Marco Polo* and *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, both of which have long passages on Prester John. The very best maps of the era all included Prester John on

them as a real person and real place. Prester John even received a glib mention in the work of Shakespeare.

The irony is that while Europeans believed in Prester John and would use religion as justification for colonizing Africa, Christianity had arrived in Africa over 1,000 years earlier. The 16th century would bring European Christian missionaries, but the Christianization of Ethiopia took place by the 4th century thanks to the Coptic Church of Egypt during the fourth century.

Ethiopia in the 4th century CE was substantively ruled by the Aksumite Kingdom, an ancient dynasty linked by religion, trade and geography to the kingdoms of Kush and Hellenized Egypt. The Kingdom of Axum can be sourced elsewhere in the Charles River catalogue, it is most commonly described as a naval and trading power that ruled northern Ethiopia and the Red Sea access between the 1st century CE and the 10th century CE. The center of the Kingdom Axum lay in the Tigray region, where today can be found the city of Axum. This includes its ancient sites and monuments, which are all protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Kingdom of Axum was an extraordinary cultural and religious moment in African history, and in fact, it was Axum that lay at the core of the legend of Prester John. The kings of Axum individually described themselves as the King of Kings, and perhaps the most famous and widely chronicled of them was King Ezana, the first to accept Christianity.

The conversion of the kingdom to Christianity and the establishment thereafter of Ethiopia established one of the earliest and greatest Christian kingdoms of the world, and the story of Ezana’s conversion is one that harks back to Frumentius. Frumentius, or Saint Frumentius was a Syro-Phoenician Greek born in Tyre who was the Bishop of Aksum and was responsible for introducing Christianity to Ethiopia. Frumentius is highly regarded in the Coptic Church in particular, and the alliances between the Coptic and Ethiopian churches are almost too numerous to mention.

The path to conversion began with the capture of Frumentius when he was just a boy and a companion of the philosopher Meropius on a journey to the Indies, which back then referred to the Arabian world. The story is told by the monk, historian, and theologian Tyrannius Rufinus, and

according to this version, Frumentius, while a prisoner, grew in the estimation of the Aksumite king, who gave him an official office. Frumentius, who was a Christian, was then offered a regency upon the succession of Ezana, since Ezana was a just a boy and too young to practically rule. From this, it can be surmised that Frumentius was probably no longer bound very sternly by the terms of his capture, and that he acquired significant power. As a result, he opened the doors of Aksum to Christian influence, encouraging the growth of Christianity throughout the kingdom. This was probably quite easy, since being Christian was part of the growing international establishment thanks to Constantine the Great's conversion of Rome to Christianity. Islam had yet to appear on the eastern horizon, and for the time being, the bonding agent of a common ideology was attractive to elites across the civilized world.

Ezana was probably converted as a child, entered power as a Christian, and duly altered the emblems of state to reflect that fact. At that point, Frumentius bid farewell to Aksum and made his way back to Rome. His route took him from Adulis to Alexandria, but there he was intercepted by the Patriarch Athanasius, to whom he related the facts of Ezana's conversion. The growth of Christianity in Ethiopia was regarded as momentous in Alexandria, and it was agreed that a See of Aksum's significance required a Bishop, so Frumentius himself was granted that appointment. Thus, he did not return to Rome as initially planned but instead returned immediately to Aksum, this time in the role of bishop. This immediately allied Aksum with the Patriarchs of Alexandra, an alliance that began a tradition of Alexandrian appointment to the bishopric of Aksum.

This Alexandrian prerogative over bishopric appointments somewhat encased Aksum within the sphere of influence of the Holy See of Saint Marks, alongside the Nubian kingdoms of Nobatia, Alodia and Makoria, and the Libyan Pentapolis. From the point of view of the rulers of Aksum, the main political advantage to be gained by a bishop appointed from outside the kingdom was simply that he occupied a role more akin in the court of the king to an ambassador and could be relied upon to be indifferent to the nuances of local power. In due course, it became accepted that this appointment would be occupied by a Coptic Egyptian, which thereafter disqualified any native Ethiopian.

Having gained a foothold in the region, Christianity remained for a long time the preserve of the urban elites, monastic communities, and those living alongside major trading routes. The rural population for the most part remained loyal to animist traditions or clung to the pre-Islamic, south Arabian polytheism that influenced elite, pre-Christian faith throughout Ethiopia. It was the mission of the Nine Saints, or the Syriac Nine Saints, that popularized Christianity in Ethiopia. The Syriac Nine Saints was a missionary outreach, and though its origins are somewhat obscure, the mission entered Ethiopia during the late 5th century CE and completed the Christianization of the kingdom.

Only three of the nine were actually Syrian, with the others having originated in Constantinople, Anatolia, and Rome, but regardless, they took the message deeper into the hinterland, and although this collision of faiths in a deeply conservative environment created difficulties, the rapid spread of Christianity in the region was achieved. The Syriac missionaries formed a nucleus of knowledge and doctrine, and many other missionaries followed suit. Thus, before Islam could gain ground in the region, a region close to the heartland of the future religion, Christianity sunk deep roots that would survive the upheavals of both jihad and communist revolutions to remain among the most robust of all spheres of Christianity.

By the beginning of the 6th century, there were Christian churches established throughout northern Ethiopia, and King Kaleb led periodic crusades against those persecuting Christians in southern Arabia, extending to Jewish groups who also engaged in anti-Christian crusades from time to time. King Kaleb’s reign is also significant for the spread of Christianity among the primitive Agaw tribes of central Ethiopia and beyond.

As with many other great cultures, the factors that influenced the decline of Aksum were both external and internal. An exhaustion of the means of production through climate change, overpopulation, and over-production reduced the all-important surplus and thus stifled the creativity of a population that thereafter began to slide into cultural apathy. Such simple cause and effects as the denudation of local woodland, followed by a lack of domestic and industrial fuel, would have discouraged concentrated settlement and stimulated the dispersal of populations away from the area.

In the late 6th and early 7th centuries, hints begin to appear in the fog of Aksumite history that all was not well. Costly military adventures during the reign of Kaleb, perhaps some conspicuous reversals, and perhaps a deadening of the national spirit under the weight of the Justinian Plague, all seemed to contribute to a slow weakening of the core. The expansion of Persian influence south down the Arabian Peninsula and the occupation of Yemen, Alexandria, and Tripoli by the Sasanian Empire, would likewise have limited and circumscribed the scope of trade available to Aksum. Such trouble would then have lent encouragement to the outer constituents of the kingdom to test the cohesion of the center and create for themselves an ever more comprehensive independence. In due course, the bonding agents of empire would crumble until the edifice slowly began to disintegrate and fracture into the dust of clans and tribes. Currency would fall away as the medium of trade, monuments would tumble, and the great works of a bygone age gathered myth and legend until they subsided into the soil of almost immeasurable time. As the mighty edifice of Rome itself began to crack and fall, so its decline would slowly undermine the dependent empires that had grown so widely, and so well, under the Pax Romana.

Perhaps the final event that defined the direction of Aksum was the rise of Islam. To the east and north, the new faith drew a virtual circle around the kingdom and what was by then the Christian enclave of Ethiopia. The survival of Christianity in the kingdom can perhaps trace some of its origin to the cordiality of relations between the Aksumite king and the Prophet Muhammad as the latter sought to establish a new faith. The Church of Ethiopia and the Coptic Church of Egypt remained the only survivors of Christianity in a hostile region, and both were for the foreseeable future isolated from contact with the core of the faith. The Holy Lands and the northern Mediterranean were abandoned by Christendom, and the great faith settled during the Middle Ages into the introspective, conservative, and self-searching institution that it became. As a result, the distant recollections of a Christian kingdom in the dark heart of Africa faded in the collective memory. The great trade routes severed, and Ethiopia languished in cultural isolation until the Age of Discovery brought Portuguese adventurers and missionaries in search of the legendary throne of Prester John.

Lalibela

"Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning." – Acts 8:26-28

The Kingdom of Axum went into decline after the Persian conquest of southern Arabia, and the subsequent hostile domination of the Red Sea trade routes. From its ashes arose the Zagwe dynasty, which in its turn survived until the closing decades of the 13th century. The ancient city of Axum was abandoned, and the capital of the Zagwe dynasty moved to the city of Roha, 100 miles or so to the south, and at the rarified altitude of 8,200 feet. The Zagwe dynasty occupied a span of time that suffered neither war nor major catastrophe, and in a productive environment, with trade networks extending as far as India and Europe, it was a time of wealth, leisure and contemplation.

During that time, a mystic king would emerge, and that king was Gebre Mesqel Lalibela. Lalibela resides in Ethiopian history almost as a Moses-like figure, born out of Genesis to undertake a deep and foundational labor. He ruled Abyssinia at the turn of the 13th century, and it was under his sovereignty that most of the monuments of Roha were built. Later down the road, Roha took the name of its most famous king.

A medieval painting depicting Lalibela

Gebre Mesqel Lalibela, or “The Servant of the Cross,” was perhaps the best known of all the rulers of the Zagwe Dynasty. According to the *Dictionary of Ethiopian Biography*, published by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University, “Lalibela was the most outstanding member of the Zagwe dynasty which ruled Ethiopia in the 1100s and 1200s. He was born in Roha, and his father of uncertain name was a nobleman or possibly even king. His half-brother Harbay was ruler, and Lalibela decided to become a hermit in the Tigre mountains to escape his persecutions. Lalibela is also said to have made the difficult pilgrimage to Jerusalem, then in the hands of the Crusaders. Harbay, on the other hand, tried to have contacts with the Pope in Rome. On his return to Ethiopia, Lalibela made a successful ‘march on Roha’. Tradition holds that Harbay abdicated in favour of his half-brother. It seems likely Lalibela had the support of the Ethiopian clergy, who were doubtless opposed to a Papal alliance. On

ascending the throne in 1181 or 1182 Lalibela took the throne name of Gebre Meskel (Defender of the Cross). It is said that King Lalibela fell ill at the age of 70 and died on 22 June 1220."

Clearly, as visitors tour the holy monuments of Lalibela and read through the gathering body of scholarship, it becomes clear a specific spiritual narrative is incorporated throughout the layout and design of the site. It is now generally accepted nowadays that the inspiration to create such a unique series of monuments came about as a result of a transformational event sometime in Lalibela's early adulthood. The actual nature of this experience has become so mythologized that it is almost a religious psalm, but based on the end result, certain assumptions can be made.

The first assumption must be that Lalibela was casting his net of influences very wide, and clearly, very well represented are the influences of Egypt, the Hellenistic world, and medieval Europe. If one were to seek parallels between Lalibela's mystic revelation and the ancient world, then the Greco-Roman Mysteries might be the first to come to mind. These were "sacred mysteries or simply mysteries were religious schools of the Greco-Roman world for which participation was reserved to initiates. The main characterization of this religion is the secrecy associated with the particulars of the initiation and the ritual practice, which may not be revealed to outsiders."

There do exist a handful of mostly mythical religious texts that touch on the life of Lalibela, and although they vary in detail, certain common themes can be discerned. The most interesting of these concerns a sleep of three days from which Lalibela emerged transformed. It is written that while thus asleep, Lalibela was visited by a vision of the construction he was commanded to build. The similarity between this experience of three days and three nights and the three-day initiatory rite of novices to the ancient Mysteries is precisely where the correlation lies. Initiates to the Mysteries were placed in a sarcophagus before departing their bodies for those three days. During that experience, they might spend time in the netherworld, deep underground, or in some other place of moral and spiritual darkness. At other times they traveled on high, among the gods.

Another common theme of the Lalibela myth is that he was poisoned, either by his brother or stepsister, and the reaction to the poison prompted the three-day out-of-body odyssey. He too was placed in a sarcophagus, where he lay in an apparent coma, during which time his soul integrated with the spirit realm. This, again, echoes the Greek Mysteries, for the acolyte would repose in a stone sarcophagus for the period of his spirit's journey.

At this point, however, the narrative swings abruptly back in the direction of orthodox Biblical influence, for Lalibela was visited by a ranking angel, named in some texts as Mikael (Michael) and others as Gebre (Gabriel), who carried him to Heaven to reveal to him the high mysteries. The common narrative goes on then to describe his ascent through various stages of heaven until the seventh stage. It was during this period Lalibela received his instruction to build the complex that would bear his name.

Naturally, it is impossible to untether the mythology from fact, but in truth it is probably not necessary to do so. By the time these events were taking place (Lalibela ruled from 1181–1221), Christianity had been established in Europe, and a very narrow tolerance existed for any deviation from that. This contrasted with the dawn of Christianity, when ancient belief systems began to merge with new. Since Ethiopia in the 13th century was surrounded by Islam, cutting the kingdom off from the rest of the Christian world, the Christianity of Lalibela would by necessity have been the Christianity of pre-Islamic Egypt. As such, the style of Christianity that inspired the epic of Lalibela had its roots in the pre-Christian mysticism of Europe and the divine hierarchy of Egypt. In the Harrowing of Hades, Jesus lay in his tomb for three days, his soul traveling through the Netherworld. On a more prosaic level, Jonah was swallowed by a whale and regurgitated after three days. Lalibela too was restored on the third day, something he had in common not only with the Greek mystics but also with the highest form of Christian existence, Jesus Christ.

According to the tale, after waking up, Lalibela commenced a mythic journey of 40 years. He visited the temples of Heliopolis, the holy sites of Jerusalem, and the sanctuaries of the Acropolis in Greece. There he resided in a school of wise men known as Pythagoreans, and in the River Jordan, he

was baptized.[1] Upon his return to Ethiopia, the throne was vacated for him under instruction from God, and he became ruler. Immediately upon that, he commenced the work of building the churches and sanctuaries of Roha.

The legend of Lalibela ends with the tale of a swarm of bees that one day converged on his infant crib as if summoned by him. Bees were of enormous symbolic significance to sun-worshipping cults, seen as tiny helpers or co-workers of the sun, gathering the sunshine, in the form of nectar, and creating a golden substance from it. The bees, as the story goes, recognized Lalibela's sovereignty, and provided a conduit to his divinity.

As the symbolism and imagery of the Lalibela structures thus begins to unfurl, and as the nature of Lalibela's Christianity begins to become clear, the underlying narrative also emerges. Lalibela's journey took him to many of the places where a composite version of early Christianity might well be established. The first of these was Heliopolis, the seat of the Egyptian sun god Ra. By the 12th century, Heliopolis lay in ruins, almost entirely buried in the sand of the Sahara desert. Heliopolis exists in this story as a symbol only, for in early Christianity, correlations between Christ and the Sun God abound, and Ra, the Egyptian Sun god, resided in Heliopolis, Greek for "City of the Sun,"

The notion of a cosmic, solar Christ was not by any means an uncommon image among early Christians. It was expressed not only by Origen of Alexandria, the early Alexandrian theologian, philosopher, and scholar, but also in an ancient Hellenistic text, the *Odes of Solomon*.[2] In Ode 15, for example, the author wrote, "As the sun is the joy to them that seek for its daybreak, so is my joy the Lord; because He is my sun and His rays have lifted me up; and his light hath dispelled all darkness from my face." Ode 11 makes this reference: "He gave me rest in incorruption, and I became like the land which blossoms and rejoices in its fruits; and the Lord was like the sun shining on the land."

Although not quite a direct reference to Christ as the Sun God, these references nonetheless indicate a popular image among early Christians of Christ as the nourishing sun, with the Earth representing the needy souls of the faithful. Bearing in mind the spiritual and geographic proximity between Egypt and Ethiopia, and the great power of the cult of the Sun god

in ancient Egyptian religious life, it would be stranger for there not to be a powerful correlation between the light of Christ and ancient worship of the sun.

It also thus stands to reason that, as Isis was regarded as an aide to Ra, the Virgin Mary was seen as the empowering vessel of the Messiah. This might on the surface seem fanciful, and it was, but proof of it is contained in an obscure volume, the *Ethiopian Book of Life*, or the *Bandlet of Righteousness* (also occasionally referred to as the *Ethiopian Book of the Dead*). Numerous parallels are drawn in this book between Mary, as a symbol of the ancient goddess of wisdom Sophia, and Isis. In a somewhat more human context than is typical, it was written that Mary required to know Christ's "secret name," reflecting a very similar theme in ancient Egyptian texts wherein Isis strives to discover the "secret name" of Ra, the Sun god's power. The translator of the *Bandlet of Righteousness*, Ernest A. Wallis Budge, noted that the role played by Isis in aid of the souls of the dead in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* reflected the same role played by Mary in the Ethiopian version (insofar as they both aided the passage of the souls of the deceased into the presence of the Sun god).

By the 12th century, allusions to Christ as a sun god had been stifled by church orthodoxy in Europe, but in Ethiopia the figure of Christ continued to be represented as such. In fact, Jesus is still depicted that way today, and throughout Lalibela, Christ is portrayed in a profoundly mystic manner as a round solar disc. It is easy to picture, therefore, the influences trickling south along the Valley of the Nile from Egypt, the direction of spiritual influence on Ethiopia as it was surrounded by Islam. In ancient times, Heliopolis was the home of the cult of Egyptian sun worship, and the residue of its influence remained. Pythagoras was reputed to have studied in Heliopolis, and Lalibela supposedly met and sojourned in the school of Pythagoras during his mythical journey. Pythagoras, of course, had gone the way of the Egyptian pharaohs, but reference to him further suggests a flavor of mystical contemplation in Lalibela's thinking. As was true with all early Christian cults, the universe was seen as endowed with a soul beyond its material manifestation, quite as man possessed a soul or life energy beyond his material manifestation. The spirit of the sun stood highest in this celestial, mysterious, and spiritual hierarchy.

When Lalibela came to power, Islam was pressing in on the Christian establishment in Ethiopia and even more so in Egypt. The besieged Coptic Church in Egypt would also remain inevitably infused and deeply influenced by ideas and imagery from the distant past, and bearing in mind that Egyptian Christianity was the founding basis of Ethiopian Christianity, it should come as no surprise that both areas were similarly affected.

Discovering and Interpreting the Site

"Let the visitor only subject himself or herself to the shafts and galleries, courts and halls, tunnels, gateways and terraces! No need to pay attention to the tales of secret passages and secret chambers; the labyrinth is labyrinthine enough as it is." – Georg Gerster

During the 14th century, news spread that there was a powerful Christian nation in Africa, and in the 15th century, Europeans discovered that Ethiopia was indeed Christian. People in the region had converted to Christianity in the 4th century CE, but thanks to the fall of Rome in the 470s and the breakdown of trade networks, Ethiopia became isolated from the rest of the Christian world. It was even claimed that the Ethiopian king wanted to contact European monarchs to help fend off what was seen as a Muslim threat. That very familiar sounding narrative convinced many Europeans that they had finally found the location of Prester John. Now they just had to go and meet him.[3]

The search for Prester John would be financed by Henry the Navigator. Although Henry never set sail on a single expedition himself, it was his funding and patronage (not to mention the development of appropriate ships and navigational techniques) that drove Portugal's momentum. By then, the Portuguese had ventured as far south along the African coast as the Canary Islands, but Henry, having personally seen the goods carried north by caravan across the Sahara Desert, was aware that slaves and gold were to be found in large quantities somewhere further to the south, and he was anxious to circumvent the Muslim trade networks of North Africa by locating the source. How far south beyond the desert the continent of Africa extended was anyone's guess, but he intended to find out.

As was true of all the European trading powers that would eventually follow in the footsteps of these early Portuguese explorers, it was not Portuguese imperial policy to try to seize or control territory on the mainland for its own sake. Instead, depots and forts were established for the sole purpose of conducting trade with the existing powers of the coast and the interior. These facilities inevitably grew into settlements as missionaries arrived and colonists assimilated, married locals, and established roots. The same was true for the Danes, the French, the Dutch and British, who all founded similar settlements as they joined the slave trade and lay the groundwork for future spheres of influence. Conditions in the interior were simply too hostile to contemplate colonization, and it would be several more centuries before wider exploration and exploitation of Africa's interior was even attempted.

The motivations of Henry the Navigator for his desire for exploration were delineated by Gomes Eanes de Azurara in *Crónica da Tomada de Ceuta.* Azurara noted that there were six reasons Henry sponsored voyages of exploration:

1. To know what was beyond the Canary Islands
2. Develop net trade agreements with far off partners
3. Learn the extent of the Muslim influence in Africa
4. The search for a faraway Christian kingdom
5. Spread the Christian faith
6. It was his destiny as foretold by astrologists.

Henry died in 1460, and while he had not found Prester John, he inspired an entire new generation of explorers to look for the fabled kingdom. By the time Bartolomeu Dias departed the Portuguese mainland in August 1487, a considerable portion of the route to the Cape of Good Hope had been established, and in practical terms, he was simply trying to connect the final dots. Speculation on tides and currents tended to suggest that the southern extremity of the African continent was close, but no Europeans knew precisely where it was yet.

In theory, the navigational demands of the voyage were relatively straightforward. It was simply a matter of following the Atlantic coast of Africa until south became east, and then north. The furthest established

settlement was the Portuguese fortress of São Jorge da Mina, located on the Gold Coast of what is today Ghana, and perhaps the point furthest known was the desert coast of what is today known as Namibia. There, the two ships could expect to encounter a cold, north-flowing current, the Benguela Current, south of which no expedition had yet passed.

The next point of landfall was the Namibian port of Lüderitz, named by Dias *Angra dos Ilheus.* Nowhere inland, however, along this parched and arid coast, could the resupply of water or food be obtained, and by then there were serious tensions on board. The two ships were entering latitudes never before challenged, and the cold current coming up from the Antarctic provoked jitters among men, some of whom still believed the world was flat.

Then, abruptly, a storm hit, and the fleet was pushed far out into the Atlantic. All that Dias could know for certain was that the ships lay somewhere west and south of their last known position. How far south was impossible to know, as navigational technology was crude and the ships were by then well beyond sight of land. An easterly course would end up carrying them in the direction of the mainland, but if by chance they had drifted to a latitude below the southern tip of Africa, they would have no idea when they sailed past it.

This was a very fundamental conundrum, and it was completely bewildering to sailors of that era. Falling back on instinct, Dias set a course due east and hoped for the best. A day passed, and then another one, but still all that could be seen from the crow's nest of the *São Cristóvão* was open ocean. Two options were now open to him – either hold firm and continue east, at the risk of missing their objective altogether (and sailing blindly into the Indian Ocean), or turn north at the risk of returning back in the direction from which they had come.

Dias' instincts told him to hold steady on an easterly course, but under pressure from his crew he reluctantly agreed to turn northeast, and this quickly proved to be a fateful decision. The expedition had indeed overshot the southern cape, and when, after sailing for 30 days without sight of land, land was eventually sighted, it turned out to be modern-day Mossel Bay in South Africa, some 150 miles east of the Cape. They named this region

Aguada de São Brás. The date was February 4, 1488, and although Bartolomeu Dias would proceed only a short distance further east along the coast than this, it was more or less on that date that he realized the way now lay open to India.

Somewhat inadvertently, Dias and his crew had accomplished one of the most crucial feats of navigation, and in many respects it was the crowning achievement of a process begun at the dawn of the 15th century under the patronage of Henry the Navigator.

Dias had been tasked with looking for and making diplomatic contact with Prester John, so he sent emissaries into the African continent to proclaim the greatness of Portugal and search for news of Prester John. It is known that he eventually rescued an ill-fated expedition around the Gulf of Guinea that had been explicitly searching inland for Prester John and his kingdom.[4]

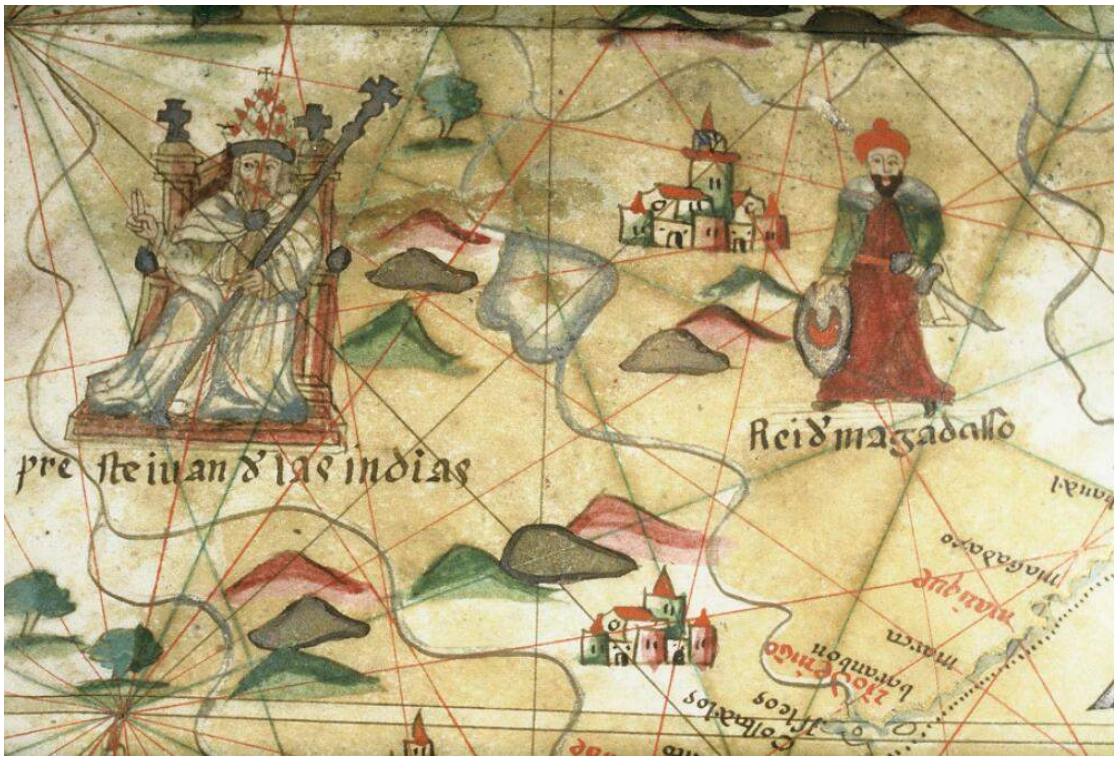
Bartolomeu Dias did not press on much further into the Indian Ocean than the site of his landing. Naturally, he returned in haste to Lisbon, arriving in December 1488 after an absence of 16 months and 17 days. The way to India had been established, and the next to appear in the waters of the southern Indian Ocean was the more famous Portuguese mariner Vasco da Gama. It was da Gama who would round what was now renamed *Cabo da Boa Esperança*, or the Cape of Good Hope, in 1497, and he would reach India in May 1498.

Though he is now known for reaching India, da Gama carried with him a letter from the Portuguese king to Prester John. He believed he was near the kingdom of Prester John when he was sailing up the Swahili Coast, and in the primary accounts of his voyage, it is documented that he continued to ask locals about Prester John throughout his expedition.[5]

Around 1490, there was a documented meeting between a European and the Ethiopian king. The man was Pêro da Covilhã, a Portuguese diplomat and explorer, and the king was Ethiopian Emperor Eskender who Covilhã, who the Portuguese believed was Prester John. Covilhã was not allowed to leave Ethiopia, but his story slowly reached Europe, and due to his cultural immersion, he would act as an interpreter and go between for decades

afterwards. In 1520, Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, whose main objective was to explore and conquer new land for Portugal, facilitated an exchange of ambassadors between Portugal and Ethiopia. Even at that point, the Portuguese were still referring to Ethiopia's kingdom as the kingdom of Prester John.[6]

A map labeling Ethiopia as the kingdom of Prester John



A 16th century Spanish map placing Prester John in East Africa

As this makes clear, it took some time for Europeans to realize that despite the fact Ethiopia was a Christian kingdom, it was not the fabled kingdom of Prester John that had been sought after for so long. It slowly came to be understood in the 16th century that Prester John was not real, or at least not where they thought he was in Africa. After that, most nations and explorers stopped searching for Prester John, even if others believed perhaps he was still out there.

While most of Africa would be conquered and divided among various imperialistic European powers, Ethiopia retained its autonomy until the invasion of an Italian army shortly before World War II. With that, Italian troops were the first Europeans in the 20th century to set foot in Lalibela, and when news of the site reached him, Mussolini, with his Napoleonesque pretentions, commissioned the first detailed study of the site to be led by Professor Monti della Corte.

Mussolini

The findings of the Corte Commission were published in 1940, months before the expulsion of the Italians from the Horn of Africa. To a fascinated world, della Corte offered up the first textual details and drawings of the site, and before long, British traveler and muralist Beatrice Playne made the journey to Lalibela, after which she wrote a detailed account. According to her, she even undertook some restoration.

The next visitor arrived in the early 1950s, and she was the wife of the then West German ambassador to Ethiopia. Irmgard Bidder spent months at Lalibela, producing an illustrated book that revealed the first high quality photographic images. While della Corte studied the site very carefully, his overall conclusions were vague and uncertain. He couldn’t figure out what to make of the region, but Bidder looked at the site in the context of what she regarded as obvious mystical influences. It was clearly a composite

amalgam of ideas, but also casting around somewhat in the dark, she made no attempt at interpretation.

A decade or so later, the first dedicated photographic expedition was carried out by the Swiss journalist and photographer Georg Gerster, who was the first European to be granted uninhibited access to all of the various monuments.

By then, Lalibela was welcoming a steady traffic of travelers and tourists, and a modern town began to form around it. Inevitably, a road was put in and an airport was constructed, around which hotels flourished. Lalibela quickly became a major Ethiopian tourist attraction, even as scholarship dedicated to understanding Lalibela remained sparse. Those historians who have studied Lalibela believe the definitive study of the site has yet to be written.

Today, Lalibela is a busy town spread over a series of low hills, and the site of the famous churches lies to the northwest of the town center. It is divided into two parts, separated by a narrow and frequently dry watercourse known as the River Jordan. The monument site is accessible for a very modest fee, and although preservation efforts are visible everywhere, many of the churches remain undercover, retaining their original aspects.

What is immediately striking about the site is that, when one considers the scope of the monuments and the isolation under which they were conceived and built, it is clear it was intended as a site of pilgrimage and contemplation, and certainly not for popular worship. The sanctuaries all lie below ground, carved from soft volcanic rock and accessible either by narrow tunnels or uncertain wooden ladders and footbridges.

The hinterland of Lalibela is scattered with numerous ancient churches and sites, but 12 of them are associated with Lalibela. Of those 12, two of them predate his reign, so while he adapted them, he did not build them. Locally, the churches are known as *bet* or *biet*, which translates as “place of worship” or “church.” Scholars tend to make more frequent use of the term “sanctuary” because some of them are not places of worship, but all of them are certainly symbolic in the overall narrative.

When viewed as a strictly Christian site, certain anomalies are immediately apparent. One is the mystical depiction of animals, and there are other non-Christian symbols that, in the era of their construction, would certainly have invited the scrutiny of the keepers of the faith in Europe. Although unmistakably Christian, insofar as it was the work of a Christian king, it was certainly not the type of orthodox Christianity found in Rome. Lalibela is a semi-mythical figure, and although the grandeur of his work is there for all to see, there are no factual accounts upon which to build a clear picture. A common theme of Lalibela's myth is that his vision for Roha came out of some profound spiritual experience, and that he intended to convey a message or tell a story through the construction of the site. If this is true, then Lalibela was a very great man indeed, for the complexity of his vision, and the worldly knowledge he would have required to conceive it, almost defies belief.

The first and most obvious curiosity is the fact the churches were all carved out of solid rock, which, notwithstanding the sheer labor, would have required a very high standard of design and project management. Details of the logistics of construction, however, do not exist, and certainly the names of the individuals responsible for the design and building of Lalibela are lost to history. There are various anecdotal threads that suggest the churches were constructed by "white men," but there is no firm evidence to back up any specific claim. It has also been asserted that Egyptian artisans and architects were responsible, which stands to reason, but modern Ethiopian archaeologists are quick to remind skeptical scholars that the Ethiopians were more than capable of constructing the complex themselves.[7] The overall style of stone masonry is certainly reflective of Ethiopian architecture in many other places, and for proof of Ethiopian prowess in monumental construction, one need only look at the stelae of Axum.

With few exceptions, the various buildings are situated in deep, constructed trenches, and all are connected in a specific sequence by a network of tunnels. The buildings were constructed by marking out and accurately excavating a trench from the relatively soft volcanic rock, leaving a large central block which was then ready to be worked. This work was undertaken using nothing more than hammer and chisel, slowly

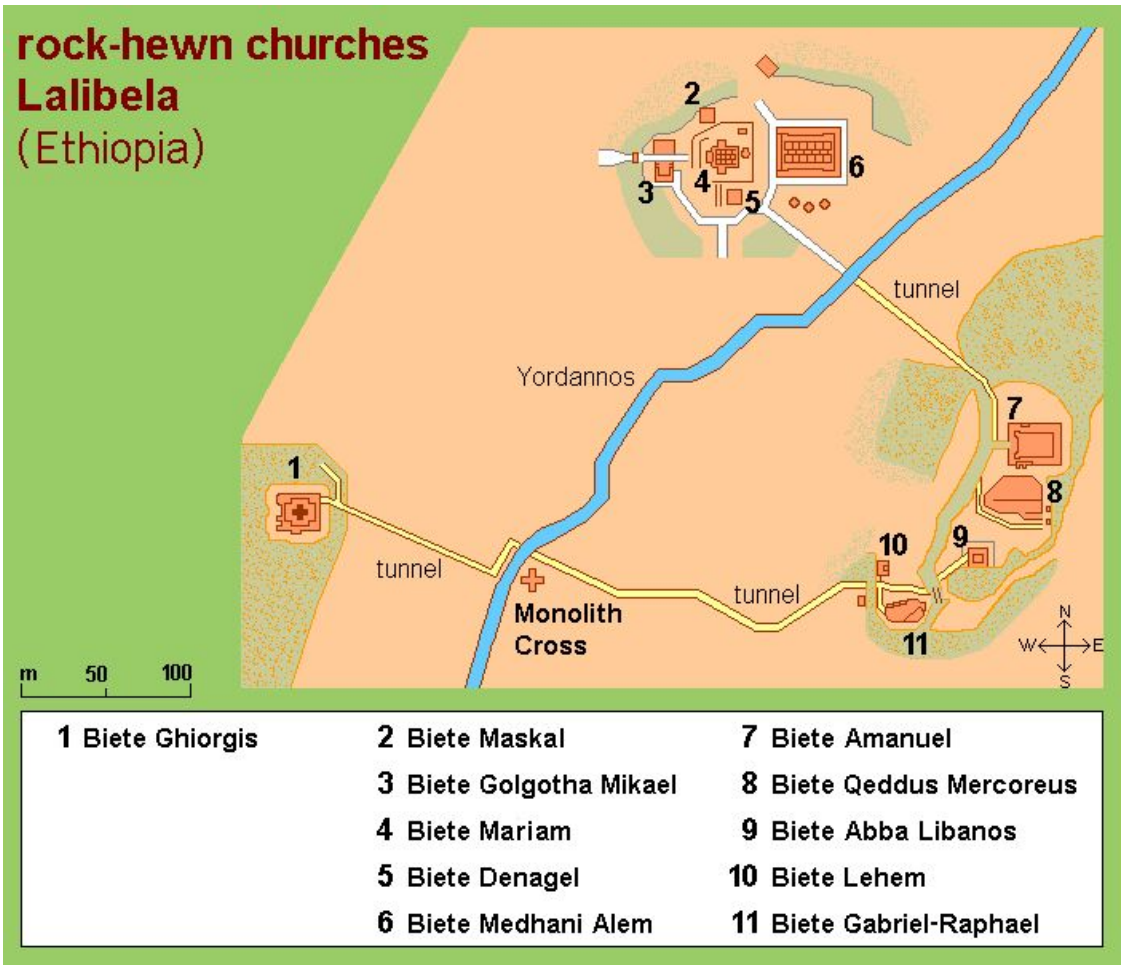
bringing to life the many forms visible today. The roof of each church, therefore, lies at ground level, with the remainder of the construction below ground.

Bernard Gagnon's picture of the Church of St. George

Typically, very limited light enters the interior of each monument, and yet most contain finely finished interiors, with detailed carvings and murals. In the words of Zimbabwean archeologist and art critic Peter Garlake, "Even if the spaces were only roughed out in the first stages of excavation, the final space was implicit in almost every part of its detail. As one cut out the apex of a dome, for instance, one had to have a precise sense of its final diameter, of the span of its pendentives, of bay sizes, of column and arch dimensions, and capital and column forms. The churches are not only testimonies to masonry skills; they are even more monuments to their architects' powers of logical thought, foresight, imagination, and ability to be in charge of every aspect of the work."

The spaces between the sanctuaries are riddled with tunnels, some linking one church or sanctuary to another, but others seemingly lead nowhere. Some were quite clearly burial chambers, and indeed, within some of them,

there still lie the remains of the dead. Two of the 12 sites predate Lalibela by many centuries and were no doubt pre-Christian, so the methodology and architectural inspiration was not original at the time. The site is sprawled across two small hills, with the central location known as the “Hill of Golgotha” or “Hill of Bread.”



A map of the site’s layout

The layout and the sequence of accessibility of each individual church or sanctuary at Lalibela was intended to carry a spiritually aware pilgrim on a journey into the mystery of the faith. Following the original approach, which required an advance from the west, the journey commenced along a narrow trench some four feet wide and 12 feet deep, which brought the pilgrim to the “Tomb of Adam.”

The symbolism of this initial encounter is multi-faceted. For example, once within the trench surrounding the sanctuary, two possible ways are offered. The way to the left broadens quickly and is easy to follow, but it leads only to the arid landscape beyond the complex. To the right, which is narrow and difficult, the route opens out suddenly to the twin churches of Golgotha-Michael. This, then, is the fundamental question asked of any follower of the Christian faith: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”[8]

The symbolism in the concept of Adam’s burial suggested perhaps the elemental decision that confronted Adam when faced with temptation. Adam then made his fateful choice, which was the easier one to succumb to but led to the squandering of paradise. Christ's mission in the world then became necessary to untangle the many negative ramifications that resulted.

The existence of this “Tomb of Adam” begs the question of why it’s part of the site, and a possible answer to this can be found in the text of the New Testament *Apocrypha*, a series of early Christian writings that describe the life and labors of Christ and speculate on the nature of divinity. These texts are maintained in the Ethiopian church and are highly regarded. In the *Treasures*, or the *Cave of Treasure*, it is written that Noah carried the body of Adam on board the ark, and when the waters retreated, he was buried in Jerusalem with the assistance of a shadowy figure called Melchizedek.

References to Melchizedek (King of Righteousness in Amharic) pepper the Scriptures and various other religious texts. He is typically described as the king of Salem, and in Genesis 14:18, it is written, “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.” It was Melchizedek who allocated to Abraham his mission of founding the Hebrew nation, which places him higher on the spiritual hierarchy than Abraham, and it was he who inspired Lalibela to create what was, at least according to some interpretations, an alternative to Jerusalem. After all, the Holy Land was now off-limits to Christian pilgrims since its occupation by Muslims amidst the various Crusades, and according to the *Treasures*, Adam was buried by Melchizedek on the hill of Golgotha, so the

new Jerusalem, with its symbolic Golgotha, must also have the Tomb of Adam.

Melchizedek, the mysterious architect of all of this, resides much more prominently in Ethiopian Christian consciousness than in the West, which is hardly surprising since the Ethiopian Church is notable even today for its Hebraic flavor. Old Testament imagery and iconography are ubiquitous through Ethiopia, and Old Testament figures and parables remained highly revered. It stands to reason, therefore, that those pilgrims visiting the site would be awed and inspired by the idea that this holiest of holies, Melchizedek himself, set foot on the very ground upon which they too stood. Damien Pryor, the author of numerous books on holy sites and relics in various parts of the world, explainedt, “This more mystical perspective, which is natural to the ancient Ethiopian church, considered the idea of angels and spiritual beings being actively involved in helping humanity quite compatible with their theology. For example, in a monastery on Lake Tana, in northern Ethiopia, is a document which mentions costly presents being given to a church by a notable person. The name of this person, which is probably an official title, actually means the Angel of the Sun… This indicates again the more cosmic nature of Ethiopian Christianity. One gains the impression that in medieval Ethiopia one is in a more transcendent, other-worldly form of the Christian religion, than in the West.”[9]

As the pilgrim continued on toward Biet Golgotha, the symbolic site of Christ’s execution, the sense was provoked that Jesus was in effect the second incarnation of Adam. Adam was a virtual prototype of man, flawed, primitive and incomplete, while the other, Jesus Christ, the Sun God, represented the ultimate, perfect, and complete embodiment of humanity. The Biet Golgotha is dedicated to the crucifixion of Christ, Mount Sinai (where Moses received the Ten Commandments), and also to the Archangel Michael, who is central to the mystical traditions of both Christianity and Judaism as a guide in the spiritual quest.

The Church of Golgotha opens out from the Church of Michael, or Biet Mikael, and might easily be overlooked. According to Beatrice Playne, it “is rather crude in comparison and appears to be used more as a vestry and

store than as a church. Yet it is here that one finds the four life-size figures of saints, carved in deep relief in the walls of the church. At one time, I am sure that these were painted, as I found traces of turquoise blue and white on their molded niches. Because these figures have their feet at ground level, or only slightly raised from it, they give an almost frightening sense of reality. I could find no satisfactory reason for the decay of two of the figures on the opposite wall and am inclined to think that this is due to a change in the nature of the rock itself. I fancy there must be a wedge of softer stone here. It is noteworthy that Alvarez only speaks of two figures so that it looks as if the others had already deteriorated by the sixteenth century."

Bernard Gagnon's picture of some of Biet Golgotha's windows

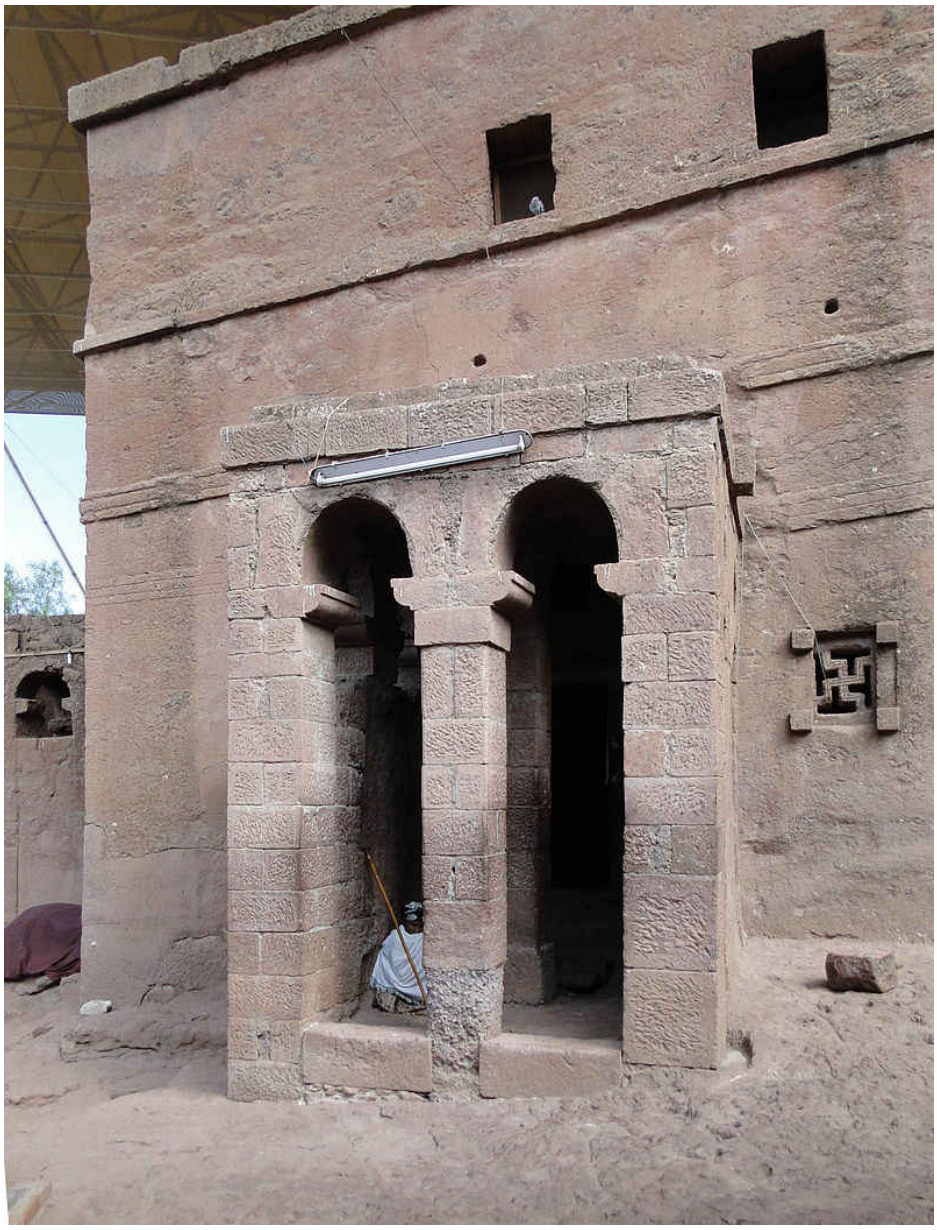
In general, the architectural style of Biet Golgotha is plain and unembellished, similar to many other examples of Ethiopian architecture of the same period. However, this structure is also clearly influenced by the monumental styles of Axum. Its main symbolism lies in its name rather than any details of its decoration or construction.

On the east side of Golgotha is the Selassie Chapel, or the Crypt of the Trinity, rumored to be the actual burial place of Lalibela. It was definitely constructed after Golgotha since access to it is through the Biet Golgotha itself, as well as a tunnel beginning at the Tomb of Adam. The interior is sparse, with three square stone altars, one of which features frieze carvings of four apocalyptic creatures (an eagle, a lion, a bull, and a man). Behind one of the altars stands two additional carvings, one of which appears to represent an ox standing upright, in clerical vestments, with the body of a man, while the other is too badly degraded to be able to say for certain what it represents. The conventional wisdom, however, is that it depicts a donkey.

From this, some historians have made the determination that the scene depicts the nativity, although this seems to be based only on the fact a donkey and an ox were present on the scene when Jesus was born. If this interpretation is correct, however, then perhaps the mystical message was simply the contrast between the divine, represented by the crucifixion of Jesus on the hill of Golgotha, or Calvary, and the lower qualities of mankind represented by domestic animals.

Thus, the narrative appears to progress from the elemental choice between the broad and narrow paths, one leading to nothing and the other to a contemplation of Christ, the divine.

From this position, pilgrims were encouraged to continue moving from west to east, so the next encounter would be with Biet Maryam, where the pilgrims would find themselves in the profound presence of the Mother of Christ. Biet Mariam is both monolithic in aspect and substantial in size, with a rather plain exterior despite three external porticos and the diversity of forms of its windows. The interior is carved in the form of a basilica and lavishly decorated with frescoes and painted bas-reliefs, while the roof is supported by a single central column. Perhaps its most significant feature is the fact it is shaped less like a church than a stately residence, or perhaps a temple or tabernacle.



Bernard Gagnon's pictures of Biet Mariam

A picture of the interior of Biet Mariam

The first and most obvious symbolism, however, lies in the windows cut into the eastern wall. Although these offer a slight illumination of the interior space, it is their shape that is of most interest. In fact, the windows are cut in a variety of shapes, one of which is the traditional shape of the cross of the Knights Templar, which led to feverish early speculation that somehow the Knights Templar had been present at Lalibela. However, this style predates the Knights Templar by many centuries, so it was widely used throughout the Middle Ages. It was also a common symbol in the pre-Christian era and features widely in Ethiopian religious representation. Indeed, it is known in some quarters as the "Ethiopian Cross," mainly for the reason of its common appearance on early Ethiopian coinage. Only after that was it was used in Rome, and later still, in 1197, that it was granted by papal dispensation to both the Knights Templar and the order of Teutonic Knights. Thus, any idea the cross was linked directly to the Templars, which continues to be suggested by lesser informed histories, is fanciful.

Another window that offers an interesting and perhaps problematic form to some is one depicting the Gammadion Cross, more commonly known as the Swastika. Obviously, the medieval Ethiopian use of the symbol had nothing whatsoever to do with the rise of German fascism, but it is nonetheless an interesting and unexpected form to encounter. As a religious symbol, the swastika, or *sauwastika*, can be found in many cultures and religions, and as a symbol, it represents divinity and spirituality in many Indian religions and sects. It was adopted by the Nazis from its Indian usage as a symbol of Aryan identity, but in the case of Ethiopia, the symbol appears only in one other place: the Church of Saint Michael in Dabra Salam, close to the city of Atsbi in Tigray. Although it is not strictly a Christian symbol, if one imagines that it was simply an alteration of the traditional Greek cross, then its presence is perhaps not so surprising.

These styles are superficial details, for it is here that the pilgrim's journey enters a deeply mystical realm. At the entrance to the porch or portico leading into the sanctuary, two bas relief carvings represent a pair of lions, easily identifiable despite significant deterioration. This too is a very odd symbol to find attached to a Christian structure. In and of itself, if one was

contemplating an ancient structure of the pre-Christian era, the presence of two lions of identical posture standing sentinel over some important site is not in any way unusual. It is, however, by no means a typical symbol of Christian context. A single lion signifies malignancy of spirit or nature, and in neither manifestation does the symbol have any obvious association with the Virgin Mary.

However, if one considers the mystical associations present throughout the site, in particular the obvious spiritual lineage with ancient Egyptian religious symbolism, then perhaps it is not so strange. Consider, for example, the great Sphinx of Giza, known to the Egyptians as Ra-Harmachis. Between its paws stands a stone tablet, or minor stelae, erected by Thutmosis IV in the 14th century BCE, upon which are carved two lions in identical posture beneath a winged sun disc. These two lions are known as the Akeru, symbolizing the influence of Ra, the Egyptian Sun god, at the rising and setting of the sun. This implies an earthly manifestation of the sun god, which ties in to the mystical Christian association of Christ with the sun.

In Biet Mariam, what is striking is the different postures of the two lions, as one is in a rising posture and the other in a sinking posture. It could be that these poses are representative of the rising and setting of the sun, in a variation of the symbolism of the Akeru. The cosmology of Akeru – the mediation of the activities of the sun's rising and setting – formed a central pillar of the teachings imparted in Heliopolis, and Lalibela was reputed to have visited Heliopolis during his mythical journey of 40 years, notwithstanding that Heliopolis ceased to exist as a center of religious practice nearly 2,000 years prior to his reign.

All of this leads a modern observer to contemplate the reason for a depiction of the Ra's activity on Earth finding a home in a Christian site. A tantalizing possibility might be a return to the initiate experience associated with the Greek Mysteries. The Akeru are also significant for their assistance to the soul after death, groping their way beyond the dark and sinister forces toward the illumination of Isis, or the divine feminine, and in Christian doctrine, there is no feminine form more divine than the Virgin Mary. Entry into the house of Mary, the Biet Mariam, cannot be achieved, therefore,

without passing through the portico guarded by two lions, in postures indicative of the rising and setting of the sun, or the fruit of Mary's womb, Jesus, depicted throughout Ethiopian religious iconography as a sun disc.

All of this further implies a deep entanglement between the established Christianity of Ethiopia and the cult of sun worship in ancient Egypt, so historians tend to be quick to qualify it all by reminding their readers that much of it is subjective interpretation, and not established archeological fact. However, much of it is also underscored by such unimpeachable logic that it is hard not to see some truth in it. It would seem Lalibela, as a result of his initiatory experience and his supernatural association with Christ, believed the Christian religion revolved around the same deity that animated the cult of sun worship in Heliopolis. In all probability, this broad view of things did not concur with the established dogma of the Ethiopian Church, but bearing in mind he was the emperor, and given the supposedly divine foundations of his mystical, spiritual experience, it was not a state of affairs the clergy was in a position to argue over.

Furthermore, the veneration of Mary as the personification of female divinity had numerous parallels in ancient Egypt and the Hellenized world. The concept of Sophia as the goddess of wisdom and the personification of wisdom, was central to Hellenistic philosophy and religion, as well as Platonism, Gnosticism, and Christian theology. There are numerous derivatives of Sophia, but one can, in essence, view her as a parallel of the Virgin Mary through her depiction as the vessel of spiritual purity, compassion, and wisdom. During that period of doctrinal overlap, the Virgin Mary was seen to possess such sublime wisdom and compassion that she merged easily with the Christian and Hellenistic sense of wisdom and compassion. Indeed, the Virgin Mary was seen often as a symbol of Sophia.

In ancient Egypt, the parallel figure was the goddess Isis. Again, as the deceased spirit gropes toward the divinity of Isis, it must pass through the house of the Akeru, the double lion entity. The symbolism and the parallels thus become obvious. In ancient religions, the passage of the soul after death, through the seven heavens into the presence of the Sun god, reflects almost precisely the journey of the mystic toward the divine: "O Osiris, I shall come each day into the House of the double Lion-god and I shall

{then} come forth from this place into the House of Isis, the divine woman. I shall be led on to the secret and holy things, even as they have granted unto me to see the birth of the Great God."[10]

A reading of the overall landscape, therefore, now begins to reveal the message Lalibela wished to convey. Damien Pryor explained, "Before attaining to the higher wisdom, symbolized by Isis or Sophia, (who helps create this new spirituality), one has to achieve the blessing of the sun god, (understood as a kind of cosmic aspect of Christ)."[11]

The pilgrim's route through this sacred landscape is at last beginning to open up. The message offered up is that only through the assistors, the Akeru, is it possible to enter the sanctuary of Mary. In other words, to arrive at a state of celestial wisdom and compassion, the aid of the sun god Christ is offered through the Akeru, or the rays of his light. The pilgrim or the acolyte, alone in the dark and silent sanctuary of Lalibela and contemplating these deep, mystical concepts, would be faced with the question: "How do you get a link to the great sun god?"[12]

Above the western porch, or the Akeru portico of the Biet Mariam, there remains visible another strange and interesting representation, long believed to represent Saint George killing the dragon. Saint George is the patron saint of Ethiopia, and at first glance, it would certainly appear that it is indeed the classic posture of Saint George slaying the dragon, although, if so, there is a second figure in the composition with an unexplained purpose. The representation, however, is very difficult to really appreciate thanks to its deteriorated condition. The assumption was that this vignette must have been carved much later, and for want of a better explanation, it was attributed to the Portuguese sometime in the 16th century.

More recently, however, it has been theorized this motif was indeed carved in Lalibela's time and bears no relation to Saint George at all. It is now thought the same scene is not depicted twice, but that the same figure is shown twice. In his hand, he holds a lance, not a spear, and what appears to be a round shield is, in fact, a depiction of the sun. The principal figure is surrounded by an eagle, a symbol of higher consciousness, and with his lance, he is spearing not a dragon, but three beasts. Included in the composition is some sort of fish or crocodile, and a winged lion, leopard, or

perhaps hyena. The interpretation of this bas relief is highly subjective, and since so little scholarship exists on the imagery of Lalibela, it might perhaps be safest to quote an established authority on the subject. Damien Pryor noted, “The second panel on the left-hand side is saying there is a task, a challenge to be completed, if the entry to this House of Mary is to be successful. The right-hand side is revealing what that task actually is: the three Beasts have to be vanquished! At the Externsteine, the great Celtic site in Germany, there is a similar starkly admonishing scene, depicting a dragon coiled around a man and a woman. Here is something similar, although here the monster is triune. What are these three monsters? In literature from across the world, where the initiatory journey is the theme, the hero has to conquer three beasts, or a three-headed beast, or a beast composed of three monsters.’[13]

This view of an enigmatic bas relief that superficially resembles Saint George does seem to rely somewhat on an interpretation of other myths. The Egyptian triune monster of the underworld, known as Amemet and described in the *Book of the Dead*, might have more direct relevance to a similar myth in Ethiopia. Both make reference to three monsters, or a threefold monster, representing the primary elements of the soul itself. Pryor points out that in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the lion represents pride, the leopard represents decadent desires, and the she-wolf represents violence and fear, so the three-fold monster depicted above the lions of Akeru could represent something similar. In other words, the imagery may be symbolic of personal challenges, perhaps best described as impulses to be addressed before the acquisition of the aforementioned higher wisdom and compassion of Sophia. As the contest between the higher and lower wills plays out, the Sun god will be on hand to assist.

All of these intense themes and ideas that confronted the pilgrim as he approached the Biet Mariam must certainly have required time in repose and contemplation, and apparently to accommodate that, what is thought to be a contemplation cell was carved out of the wall of the trench opposite. Described as a “monks cell,” it is situated several feet above ground and is accessible by a set of stone steps. From this position, a novice, initiate, or acolyte was able to directly view the western porch and the bas reliefs. This would tend to confirm that the Biet Mariam represents the spiritual center

of the site, and certainly, in terms of Egyptian esoteric spirituality, a westward contemplation was to gaze beyond the mortal horizon into the realm of the spirits, the dead, and divinity. Some interpretations of the configuration suggest the cell was the private sanctuary of Lalibela, who was able from the cell to look down on ceremonies taking place in the courtyard below. There is no reason to suppose this was not true, although the consensus tends to be that its function was to provide space and repose for the contemplation of the bas reliefs.

From Biet Mariam, a narrow trench leads the pilgrim to the extraordinary sanctuary of Medhane Alem, also filled with curious symbolism. Medhane Alem is the largest hand-carved, rock-hewn church in the world, and the largest and most impressive of the 10 Lalibela sanctuaries. It measures almost 40 x 40 x 40 feet, and it lies in a similarly excavated courtyard measuring about 100 x 70 feet.

Perhaps the most striking first impression as one approaches Medhane Alem is the 36 four-sided pillars that surround the structure, upon which a low pitched, saddle-backed roof is cut. Below the line of the roof is a frieze of round arches, cut in relief, that decorate the vertical edges. In total, there

are 72 such four-sided, rectangular pillars, half of which are located in four rows arranged in the interior. These pillars, in terms of shape and arrangement, clearly have some significance beyond the practical need to hold up the roof, simply because they take up so much space that a large assembly of people is impossible. The interior pillars are stout and robust while the exterior pillars are more slender, and indeed, several were ruined and replaced in the 1950s.

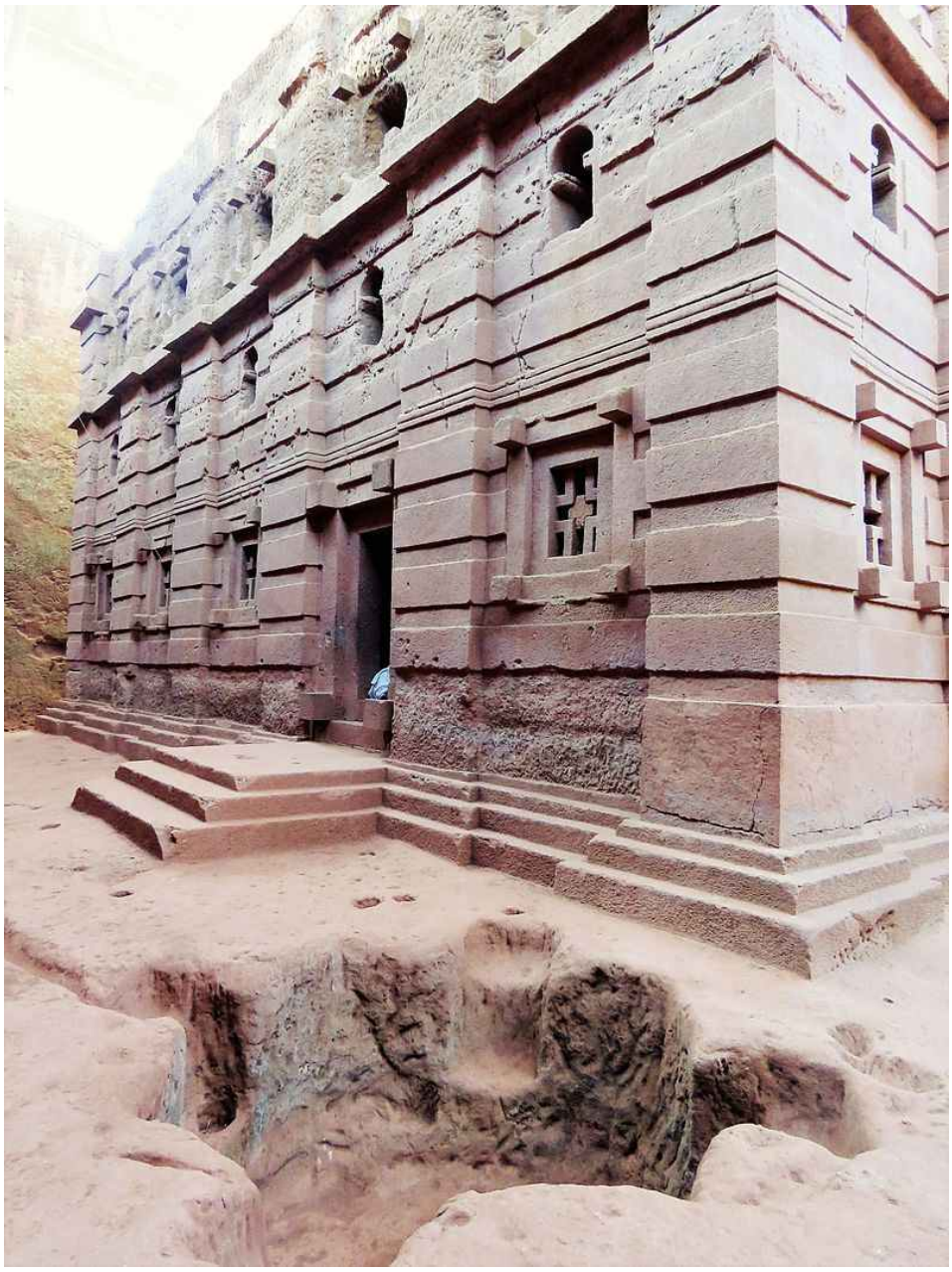
The number 72 is significant, as is the configurative arrangement of the number four. On the north, west, and south sides of the structure, there are doors, while on the east side there is an altar set beneath a dome, creating in the interior the shape of a cross. The conclusion reached after years of speculation is that the number 72 represented the 72 nations of the Earth: “The haggadic assumption that there are seventy nations and languages in the world is based upon the ethnological table given in Genesis, where seventy grandsons of Noah are enumerated, each of whom became the ancestor of a nation. The earlier Christian writers also took this table as determining the number of existing nations and languages; but reckoning with the Septuagint, which counts seventy-two grandsons of Noah, there must be seventy-two nations and languages.”[14]

The implication is the diversity of human nations united in a global community of goodwill. Each of these 72 nations, according to both religious and secular texts, were administered by a guiding spirit, the “72 princes on high.”

From this, one can extrapolate in any direction, and certain common themes have emerged. In aggregate, thanks to the descent of Christ, the spirit of the sun, and his sacrifice on the hilltop of Golgotha, people from every corner of the world were at last able to unite in harmony.

The watercourse dividing the two sections of the Lalibela sanctuary complex is known as the River Jordan, on either side of which the various sanctuaries are arranged. Of the sanctuaries here, only two can be identified as churches, while the others are less easily identified as such and are not believed to have been built by Lalibela at all. T

The Biet Emmanuel, or Biet Amanuel, although lacking the overtly mystical symbolism of the structures in the northern section, is regarded by art historians as the finest of all the monuments of Lalibela. Today it is covered by a protective roof, beneath which a monolithic structure, about 60 x 40 x 40 feet, was carved from rock in the true Axumite architectural style. The interior of the church, however, is sculpted in a basilica style, complete with the correct east-west orientation. Axumite architecture was based on wooden lintels and stone masonry, and while the Biet Emmanuel was cut in imitation of this, its inspiration is nonetheless unmistakable. This, indeed, was the church used by Lalibela himself. According to the main Ethiopian tourist website that deals with Lalibela, “Entering the courtyard, you will see this fascinating church on its stepped platform shining in the bright red color of the Lalibela tuff. The imitation of Axumite wood and stone construction is striking, its walls built in horizontal and vertical bands, alternately recessed and projecting. At the three entrances, in front of which the stepped platform widens into landings, the church has a framework of protruding beams; genuine monkey-heads are missing. There are three rows of windows, the bottom and top ones having frames with corner posts. The bottom windows are pierced in that shape of straight Greek crosses; those in the top row have no fillings.”[15]



Chuck Moravec’s picture of the structure

Perhaps the most striking feature of this building is the fact that, while it too is constructed in a deep trench, access to it at the time of its construction could not be gained either by pathway or tunnel, but a ladder of about 40 feet. Access by tunnel was possible for the king from the nearby Biet Mercurios, which is believed in fact to have been Lalibela’s royal palace. However, the entrance to this tunnel also lies several feet above ground,

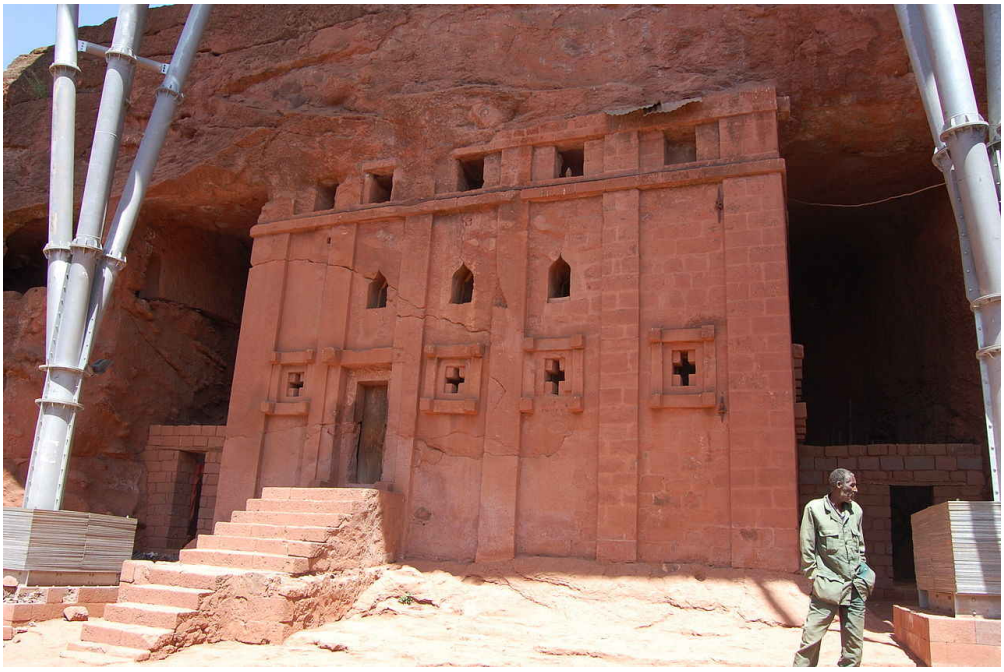
which is certainly curious. Why this was so is a matter of speculation, and there are still no strong theories.

Biet Mercurios, the supposed royal palace, was neither planned nor oriented in any conventional manner, and the section of it that serves today as a church comprises the eastern end of an underground hall which opens into a courtyard. The interior appears to be without decoration, although six kings, or saints in royal apparel, are depicted in a mural on the lower pan of a pillar, each holding in their hands a cross. In keeping with the notion that this was at one time Lalibela’s royal palace, numerous fine works of art once decorated the walls, but these have been removed and are now to be found in the National Museum of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa.

A picture of Biet Mercurios

The other notable structure associated with this complex is the church of Abba Libanos, or literally “Father of Lebanon.” Abba Libanos, known sometimes as Abba Mete'a, was one of the nine saints credited with the spread of Christianity in Ethiopia. Some sources also claim it was he who created the complex hydrology of Lalibela, exploiting the below-ground

water table to provide a reliable source for the city and surrounding agricultural settlements. A scene is illustrated in the interior of his sanctuary depicting him touching a rock from which freshwater gushes, although this may also represent the parable of Moses striking a rock with his staff and causing water to come forth. Water was acquired in Lalibela from a series of deep wells, some of which are still in use today.



Katie Hunt's picture of Biet Abba Libanos

The church is carved into a recess, or a cave, and is also reminiscent of Axumite architecture, with its roof not separated from the overlying rock. The three sides of the church, however, have been excavated. The interior of Biet Abba Libanos features aisles and a nave that run east to west, and it is said a faint beam of light falls perpetually on the middle of the altar wall, which some suggest is less a divine token than a small phosphorescent stone.

Next is Biet Lehem, or the Chapel of Bethlehem, accessible through a long subterranean passageway commencing on the right-hand side of Biet Emmanuel, passing Biet Mercurios and the courtyard of Abba Libanos. The tunnel winds up in a spiral through the hill, ending in a low, round room with a tree trunk as its central pillar. Small openings provide a very limited amount of light. This curious chamber has several names, among them the

“Hill of Bread”, the “Bakery of the Holy Bread”, the “Stable of Lalibela” and the “Hermit Cell of Lalibela.” Clearly, it was never a stable, nor a bakery, but perhaps the association with bread is derived from its use as a meditation chamber intended for the contemplation of the food of the spirit, and the bread of life.

The next structure worth examining is Biet Gebriel-Rufael, This is a twin structure that does not appear to belong to Lalibela, as it mostly contains a pre-Christian aspect. It is described in official literature: “This church is more difficult to describe in character and situation than the others. Its disorientation and unusual plan suggest it was originally not intended to serve as a church. Instead, the floor plan is labyrinthine: three angular halls with pillars and pilasters are squeezed between two courtyards. The most impressive part of the church is the monumental facade.”

Bernard Gagnon’s picture of Biet Gebriel-Rufael

The monumental façade certainly is its most striking feature, with its seven blind arches, unmistakably Moorish in aspect. There is no identifiable Christian imagery in the original structure, and one can conclude that its

conversion for use as a double chapel occurred sometime after Lalibela's lifetime.

The arches, with their rounded apex, echo the design of Axumite stelae, although the latter are somewhat more ornate. It has been speculated they represent the seven stages of heaven and the journey into the afterlife. There is also a walkway with seven openings, like small doorways, now known as the "Path to Heaven," but the origins of this name are obscure.

The interior is much smaller than suggested by the exterior, hollowed out to form a hall divided by pillars. Three Latin crosses are cut into the wall, forming the only observable decorations. Numerous partly covered holes, which are reputed to descend to great depth, cover the floor.

Finally, there is the Beit Giorgis, or the Church of Saint George, the patron saint of Ethiopia. It is somewhat removed from the main complex of Lalibela churches and sanctuaries, located to the southwest of the city on a sloping rock terrace. It is perhaps the most recognizable of all the churches, similarly cut into the stone and surrounded by a deep trench. It is shaped in the form of a cross with arms of almost equal length, and it is typically described as the most elegant and refined of all the various churches and sanctuaries associated with the complex. The stonemasonry is clearly of a very high standard, and its orientation is correctly configured with the main entrance in the west and the holy of holies to the east. It is accessible through a tunnel that commences via a trench some distance away. Small caves and chambers have been cut into the walls of the courtyard, presumably as tombs and sarcophagus.

The exterior profile of the church, as mentioned already, is cruciform and seated on a triple-stepped platform, the regularity of which is disturbed only by the steps and the landings that approach the three doorways cut into the west, north, and south walls. Perhaps the most visually striking element of the church is its roof, which is decorated by three Greek crosses, each inside the other, in a representation often described as the symbol of Lalibela himself. The roof is drained by a series of gutters and spouts that carry water away. As one writer put it, "One of the more sophisticated details of Biet Giorgis is that the wall thickness increases step by step downward but

the increase is cleverly hidden by the horizontal bands of moldings on the exterior walls."[16]

The floorplan of the interior of Biet Giorgis, despite its orientation, also follows the cruciform pattern. It does not contain any authentic interior pillars, but instead four three-sided pilasters projecting from the wall, each with corbels supporting the arches. Above the sanctuary, in the eastern arm of the interior "cross," is a dome decorated with a cross pattée in bas relief. The other arms of the interior cross display a straight relief cross, while the intersection of the cross is without decoration.

Conclusion

Lalibela has become a major Ethiopian tourist attraction, with daily flights from Addis Ababa arriving at the airport at Lalibela, and numerous hotels have been built in recent years to accommodate the steady arrival of curious visitors. At the same time, the site remains an active center of Ethiopian Christian pilgrimage, and as tourists wend their way among the monuments, Ethiopian pilgrims and other regional pilgrims are found reading religious texts or contemplating the message left by the enigmatic king responsible for this extraordinary monument.

Tourism, while bringing in significant revenue, is also responsible for the rapid deterioration of the site in the last 40 years. For many centuries, the intricate system of water drainage was blocked and only cleared in the 20th century, with the result that water damage and occasional seismic activity have left many of the churches in very poor condition. On top of this, the increased traffic has left many of the painted murals, as well as the various sculptures and bas reliefs, in poor condition, with their original features now hardly recognizable. Biet Amanuel is regarded as being at imminent risk of collapse, while all of the principal structures are, to a greater or lesser extent, similarly compromised. Temporary shelters have been erected over some of the more vulnerable churches, although this inevitably interferes with the visual integrity of the site.

Responsibility for the preservation of Lalibela has for centuries been shared by the church and the state, the former represented by a large community of priests and monks who not only use the site for its traditional

purpose but administer the flow of tourists. No specific laws are protecting Lalibela, and the site is under the regional and the Lasta district culture and tourism office. Lalibela came under the protection of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO, in the late 1970s, and although numerous reports have been compiled, very little practical work has been undertaken to restore and preserve the site. According to the UNESCO Plan of Action, "Erosion, due mainly to weathering, is damaging the stone surfaces of all the churches, so that restoration is a matter of urgency. Religious objects too, such as a cross, manuscripts and a wooden altar, must at all costs be preserved. UNESCO and the European Community have organized an international competition to built temporary shelters to protect the monuments from the rains. As soon as it is technically possible, the sites will be restored."

In fact, in 2006, a four-year conservation plan was tabled and established, but this has yet to be implemented. In the meanwhile, the rapid urbanization surrounding the site is going ahead largely unregulated, with no practical buffer zone established around the site. According to UNESCO, "There is a need for stronger planning controls for the setting of the churches that address housing, land-use tourism and for a management plan to be developed that integrates the Conservation action plan, and addresses the overall sustainable development of the area, with the involvement of the local population."

As a poor, semi-developed nation, Ethiopia competes with sites and monuments all over the world for vital conservation funding. The deterioration of the site, however, is advancing conspicuously, and without some rapid and comprehensive program of preservation and restoration, the future of Lalibela is by no means certain.

Online Resources

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Other titles about Lalibela on Amazon

Further Reading

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Hancock, Graham, Carol Beckwith & Angela Fisher, African Ark – Peoples of the Horn, Chapter I: Prayers of Stone/The Christian Highlands: Lalibela and Axum. Harvill, An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, ISBN 0-00-272780-3

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[1] Pythagoras, or course, died in 495 BCE

[2] The *Odes of Solomon* is a collection of forty-two odes attributed to Solomon. The composition of these religious poems has been dated within a broad range of the first three centuries CE. The original language in which the Odes were written is believed to have been either Greek or Syriac, and to be broadly Christian in origin.

[3] Brooks, 68.

[4] Sahoboss, "Bartolomeu Dias," South African History Online, December 07, 2017, accessed February 05, 2019, https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/bartolomeu-dias.

[5] Brooks,132-133.

[6] Ibid, 19.

[7] According to some sources an Egyptian Christian refugee named Sidi Mesqel was the main architect and engineer of the various sanctuary sites of Lalibela, who it is also claimed was buried in the Medhane Alem church.

[8] Matthew 7:13-14

[9] Pryor, Damien. *Lalibela in thirteenth century Ethiopia* (Great Sacred Sites Series Book 2) Kindle Edition

[10] *Book Of The Dead* (1901): An English translation of the chapters by Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge

[11] Pryor, Damien. *Lalibela in thirteenth century Ethiopia* (Great Sacred Sites Series Book 2) Kindle Edition

[12] Ibid.

[13] Pryor, Damien. *Lalibela in thirteenth Century Ethiopia*. Kindle Edition.

[14] *Jewish Encyclopedia*, *the Book of Jubilees*, 1906, by Kaufmann Kohler, Isaac Broydé

[15] selamta.net

[16] selamta.net

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